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(54) **DOWNHOLE TOOL HAVING A SEALING ELEMENT CONSTRUCTED FROM A POLYVINYL ALCOHOL COMPOUND**

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See application file for complete search history.

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Primary Examiner — Zakiya W Bates

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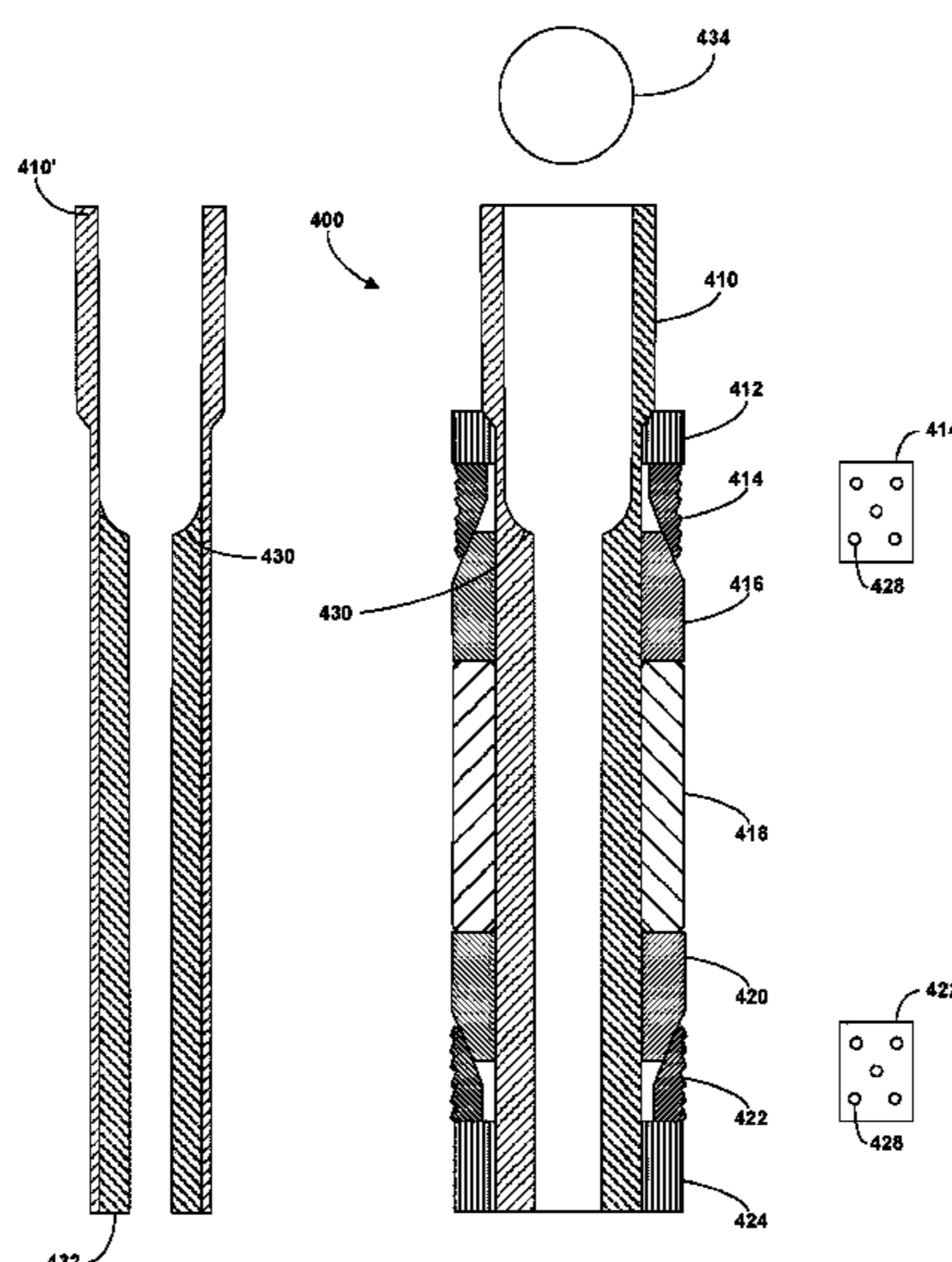
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

Degradable downhole tools, tool components, and balls are formed from a polyvinyl alcohol (PVA) compound. The PVA compound exhibits strength and elasticity properties that are comparable to existing degradable downhole polymers and further exhibits degradability properties that are superior to existing degradable downhole polymers. For different components, the PVA compound may include a reinforcing material such as fiberglass. A plug for use in a wellbore conduit may include a sealing element that is formed of PVA compounds of various types.

20 Claims, 7 Drawing Sheets



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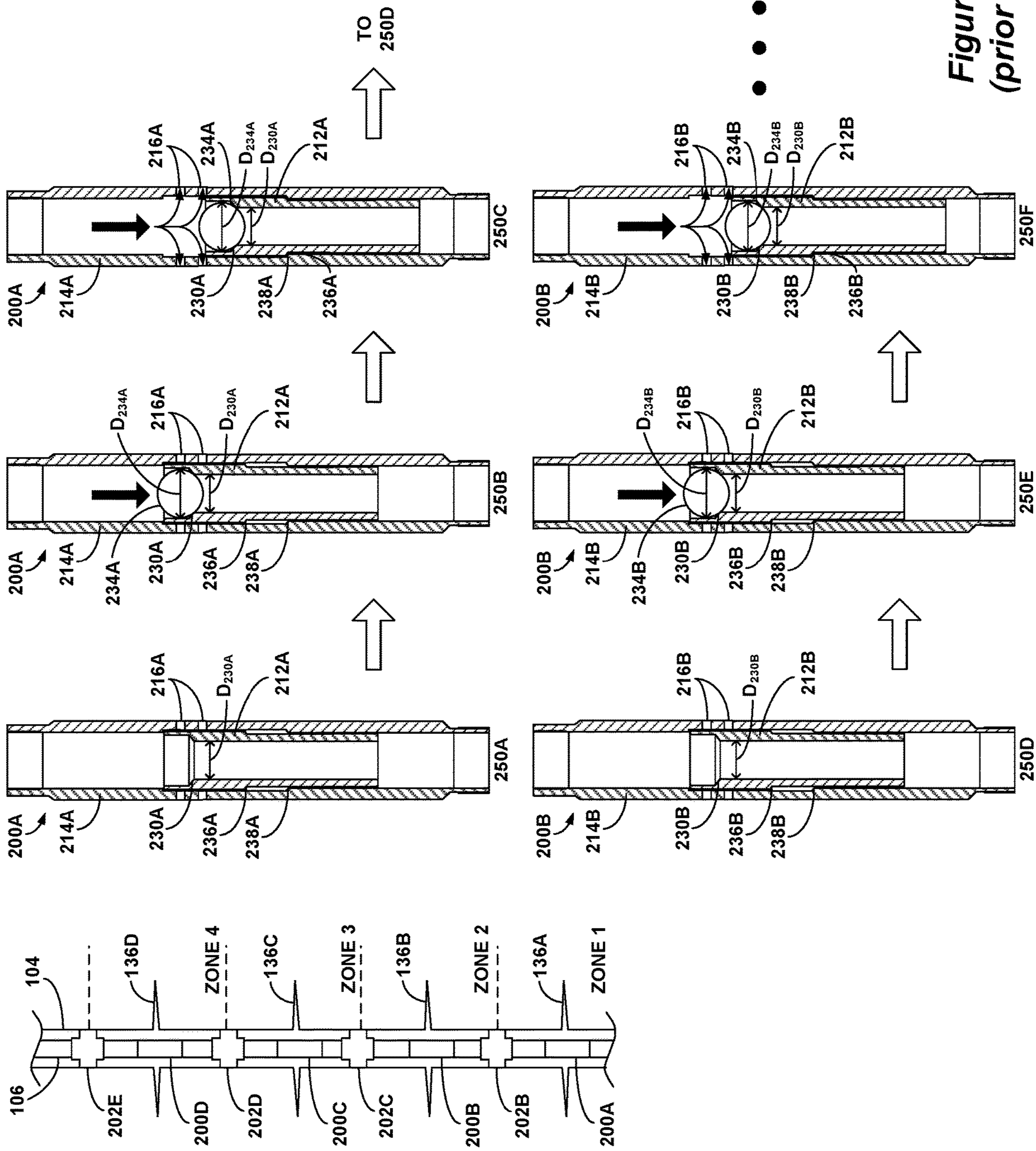
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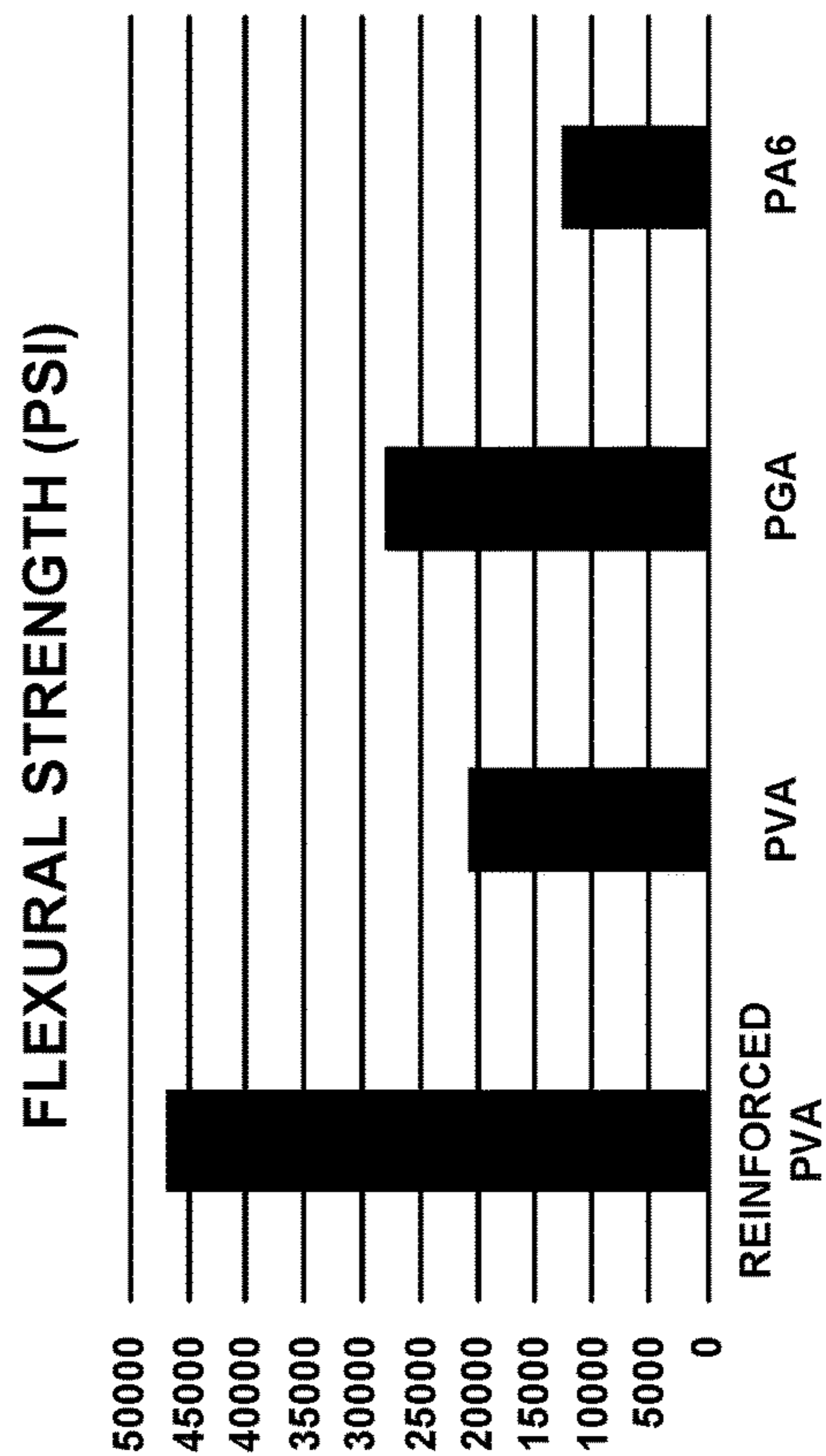
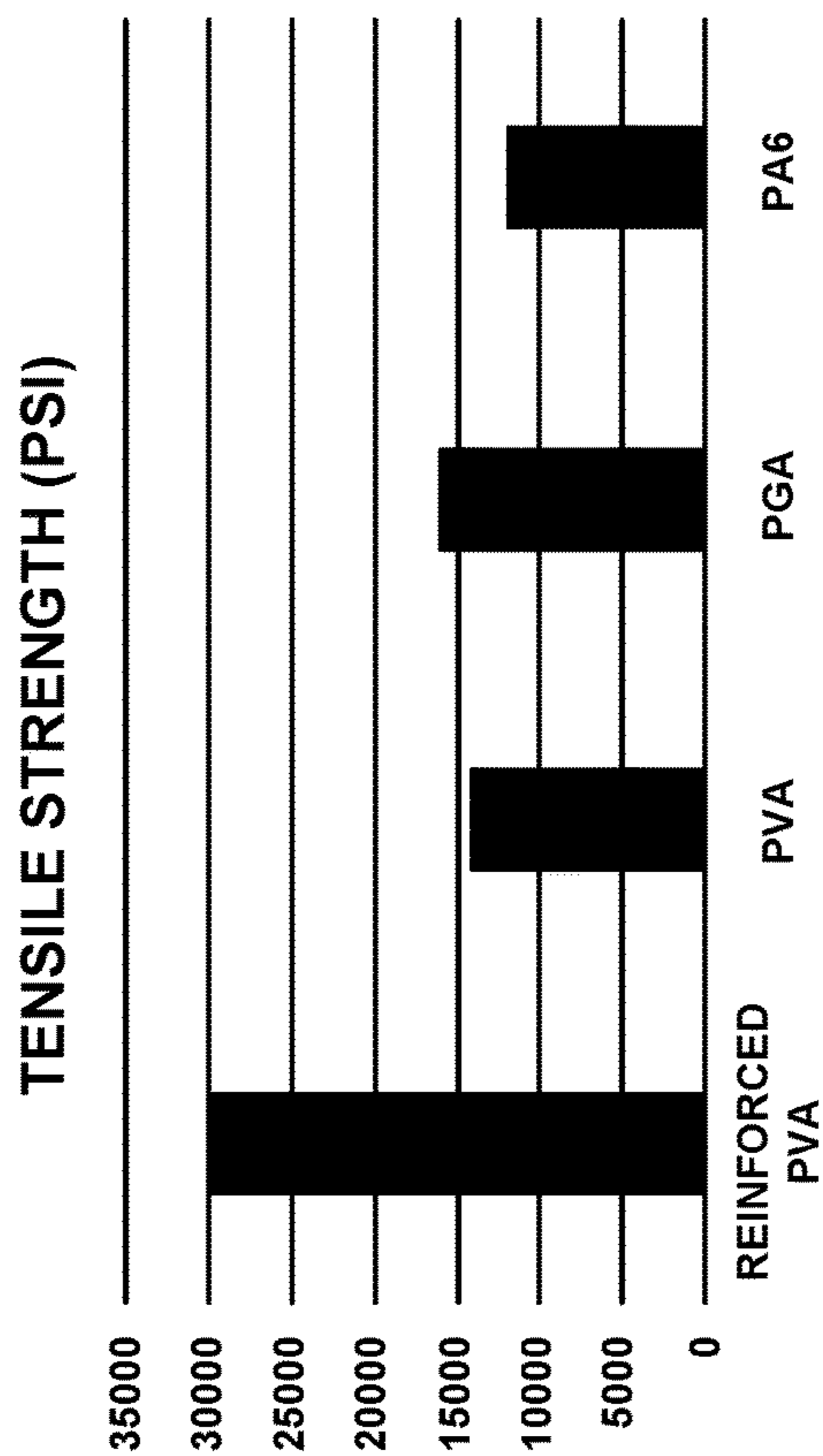


Figure 3

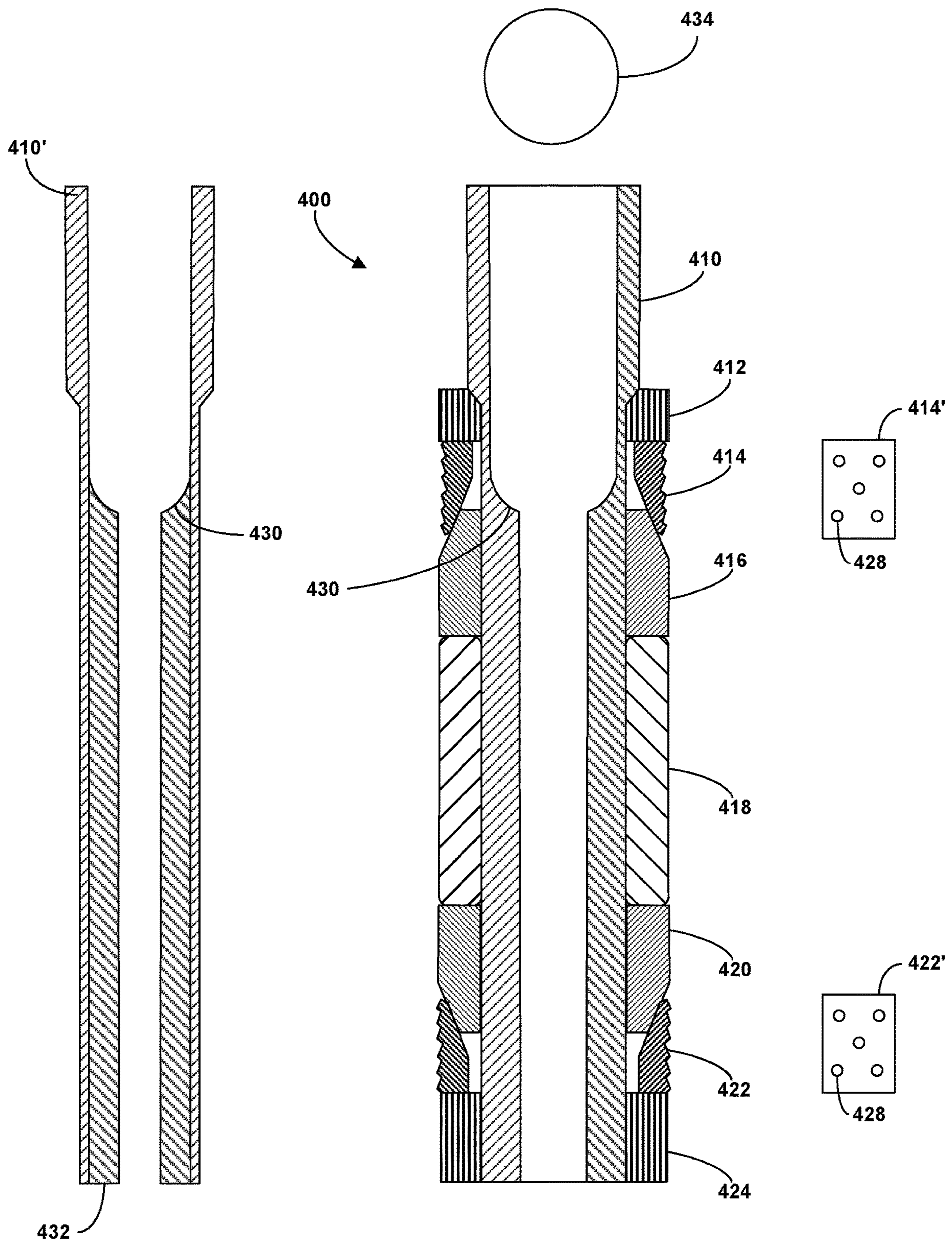


Figure 4

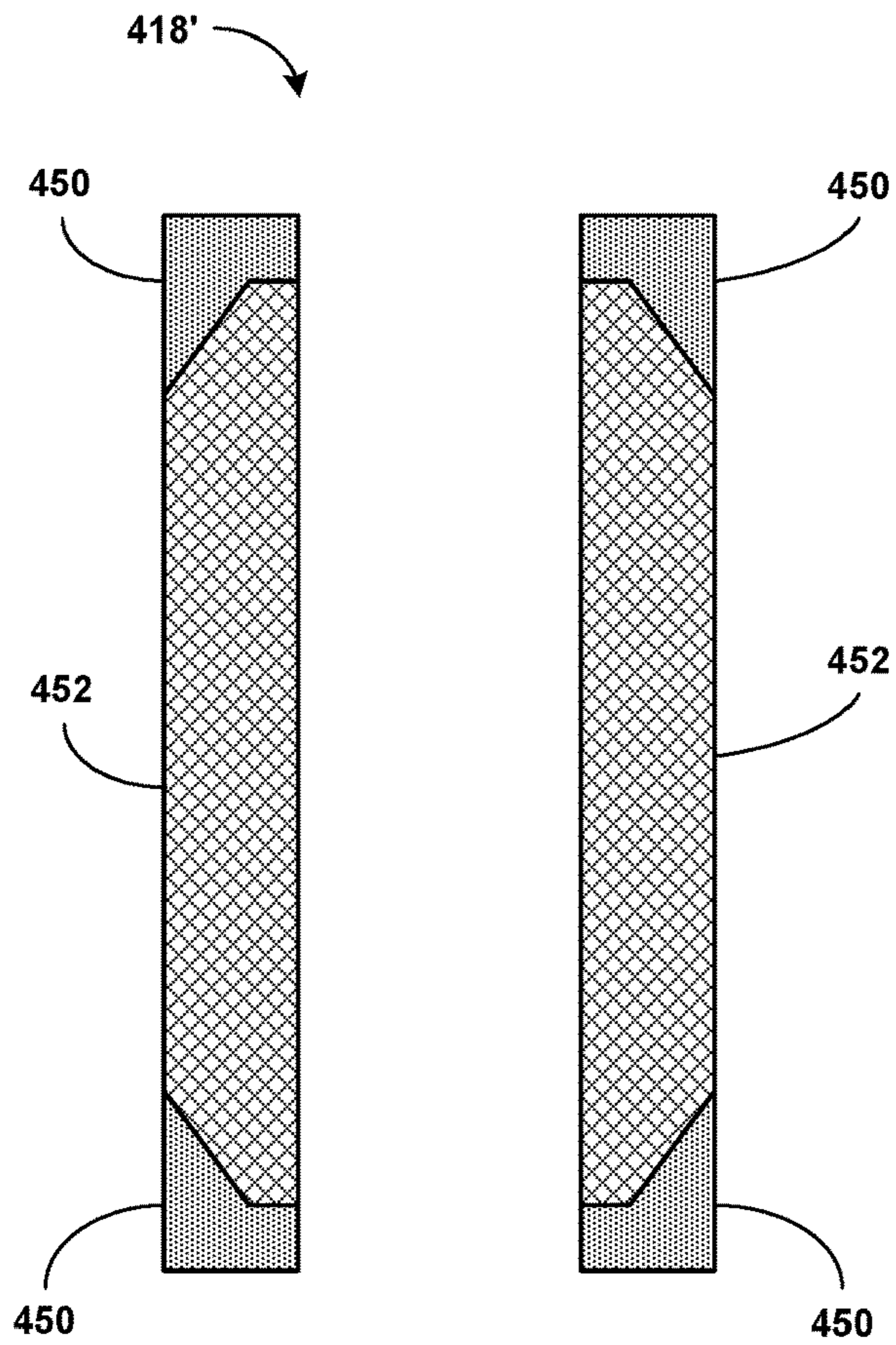


Figure 5A

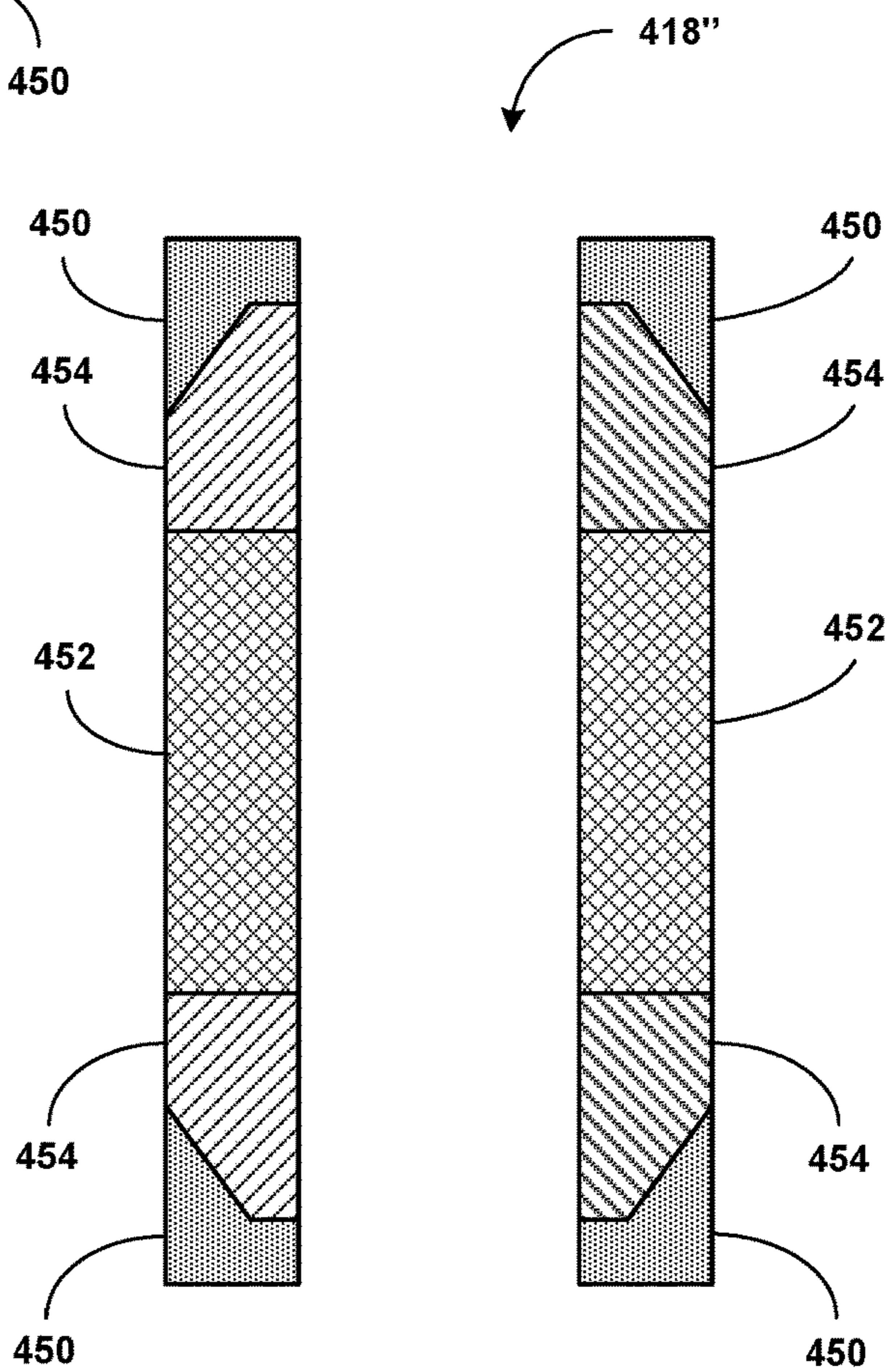


Figure 5B

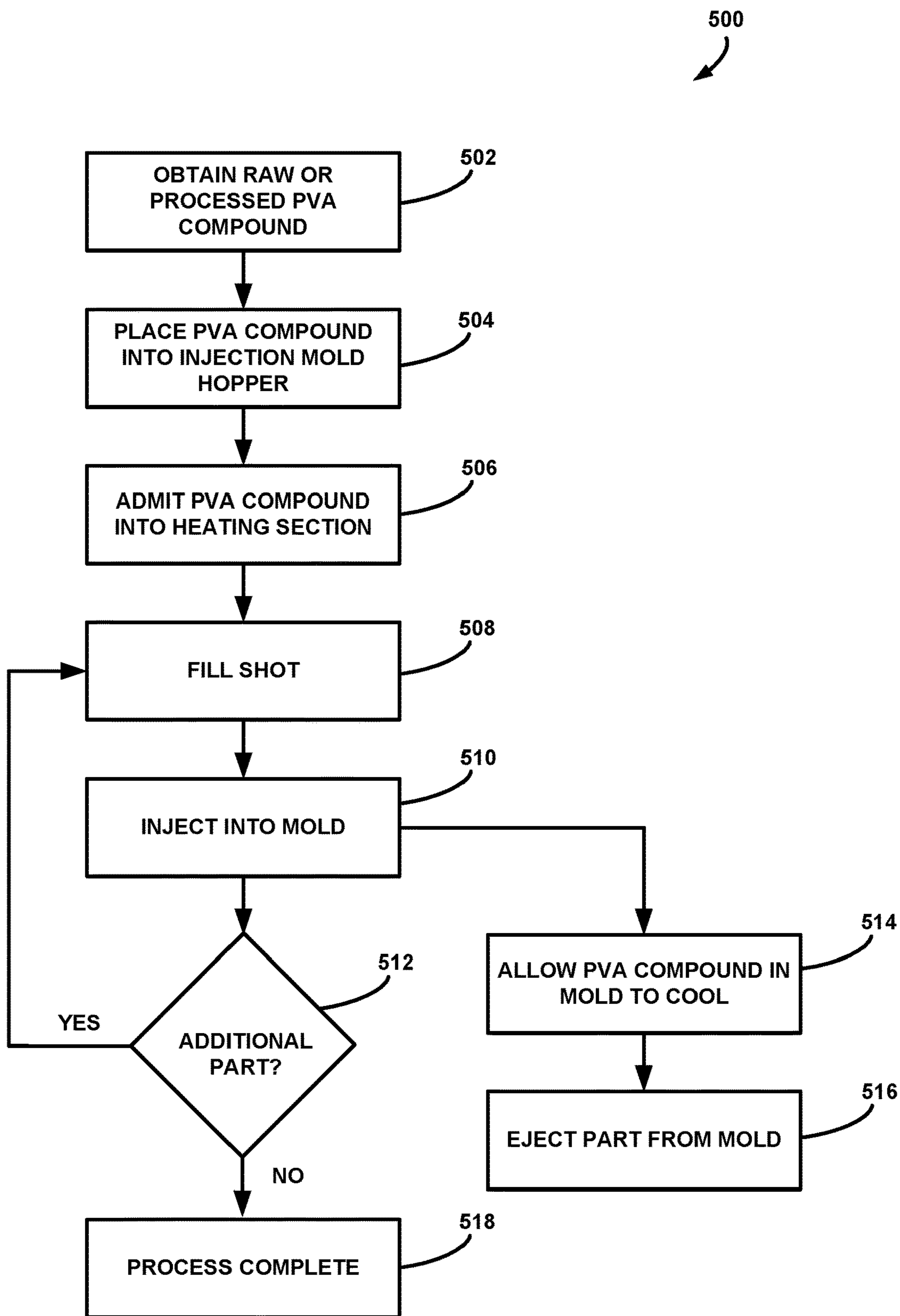


Figure 6

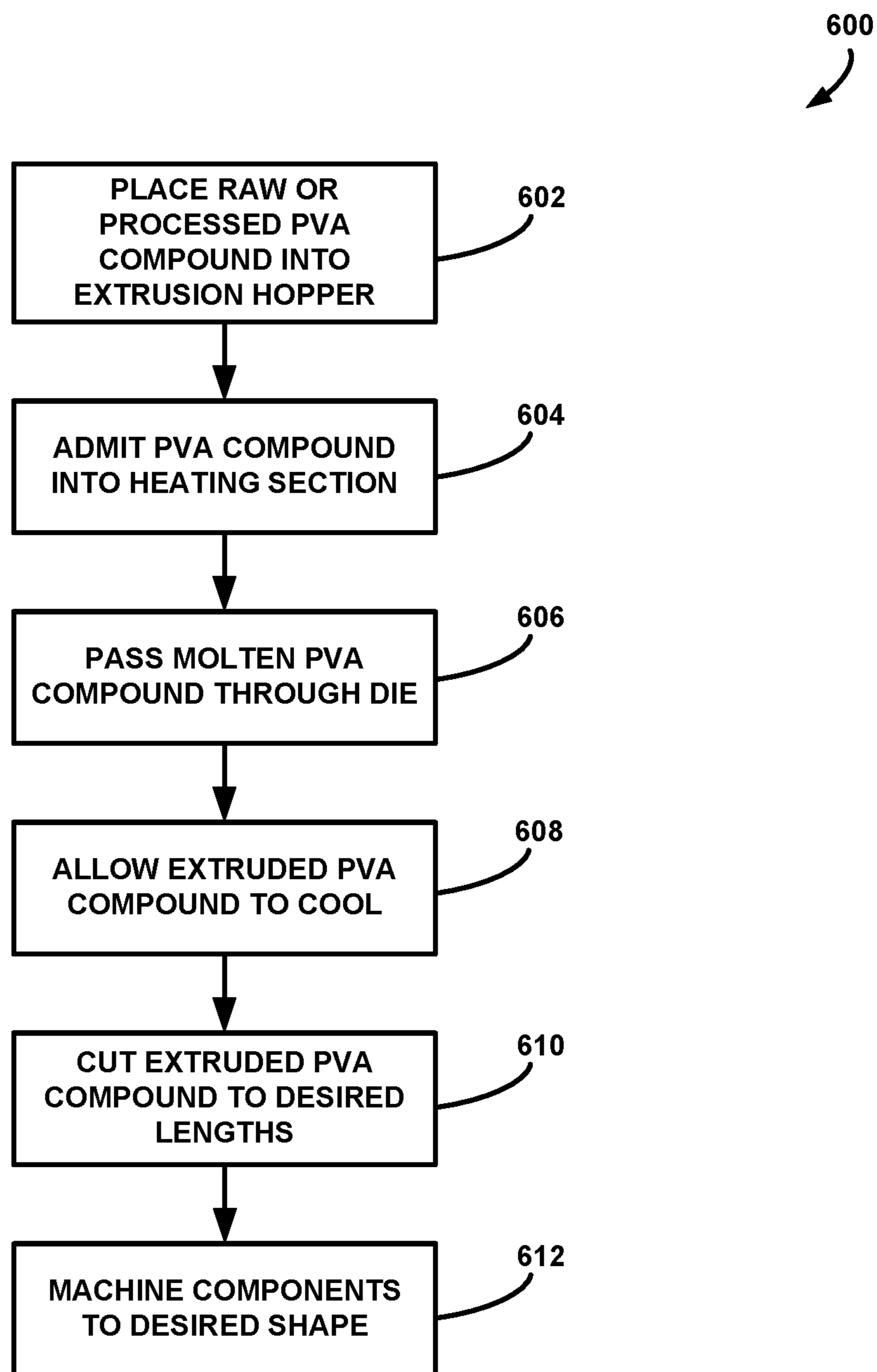


Figure 7

**DOWNHOLE TOOL HAVING A SEALING
ELEMENT CONSTRUCTED FROM A
POLYVINYL ALCOHOL COMPOUND**

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED
APPLICATIONS

This application is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 15/969,943, filed May 3, 2018, which is a non-provisional of U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 62/502,316 (“the ’316 Application”), filed May 5, 2017, which are incorporated herein by reference in their entireties, and to which priority is claimed. U.S. patent application Ser. No. 15/969,943 is also a continuation-in-part of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 15/241,602, filed Aug. 19, 2016, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety, and to which priority is claimed. U.S. patent application Ser. No. 15/241,602 is a non-provisional of U.S. Provisional Patent Application Ser. No. 62/207,052, filed Aug. 19, 2015, to which priority is claimed.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This application relates to the field of degradable downhole tools and equipment and methods of manufacturing such tools and equipment. More particularly, the application relates to tools and equipment manufactured from degradable polymers that are useable in downhole operations.

BACKGROUND

Recent advancements in hydrocarbon recovery techniques have enabled the production of hydrocarbons from reservoirs that could not be produced economically without the use of such techniques. In particular, hydraulic fracturing (or “fracking”) involves the injection of a high pressure fluid (primarily water, proppants, and other job-specific compounds) to fracture a portion of a hydrocarbon-containing formation such that the desired hydrocarbons may be more easily recovered. Typically, multiple zones of a formation are independently isolated and fractured.

One common technique for isolating and fracturing different zones in a formation involves a process known as “plug-and-perf,” which process is illustrated in FIG. 1. This process may be utilized with various different arrangements of hydrocarbon production conduits. For example, conduit **106** may be production casing that is cemented into wellbore **104**, a liner that is cemented in wellbore **104**, or a liner that is situated within an open wellbore **104** (perhaps with swell packers isolating the annuli between the various zones). The plug-and-perf process can also be utilized with other production conduit arrangements, as is known by those of ordinary skill in the art.

The plug-and-perf process begins by isolating the zone for which hydraulic fracturing is to be performed from lower zones in the wellbore **104**. This is accomplished by lowering a plug **100** into the well. In the example illustrated in FIG. 1, plug **100A** is lowered to a desired location within the production conduit **106** from the surface of the well via a conveying apparatus **102** such as wireline, slickline, or coiled tubing (step **150A**). It should be noted that the example illustrated in FIG. 1 assumes that a zone downhole (as used herein the terms “downhole” and “uphole” refer to locations that are further from and closer to the surface of a well, respectively) from ZONE 1 is to be isolated from the hydraulic fracturing operation performed in ZONE 1.

The plug **100A** is then mechanically actuated (e.g., using a setting tool) to cause the plug to engage the production conduit **106** and isolate the portion of the production conduit **106** below the plug **100A** from the portion of the production conduit **106** above the plug **100A** (step **150B**). In the illustrated example, the plug **100A** is set by driving the shoulder **112A**, which is disposed circumferentially about a mandrel **110A**, toward a lower end of the plug **100A**. As the shoulder **112A** is forced downward, the cone **120A** is driven behind the slips **122A** causing the slips **122A** to move radially outward from the plug **100A**. The slips **122A** include teeth that engage the interior wall of the production conduit **106** to prevent downward movement of the plug **100A**. In addition, the sealing element **118A**, which is constructed from an elastomeric material such as nitrile rubber, becomes deformed and contacts the interior wall of the production conduit **106** to form a fluid tight seal between the outer surface of the mandrel **110A** and the interior wall of the production conduit **106**. As the shoulder **112A** continues to be forced downward, the cone **116A** is driven under the slips **114A** causing the slips **114A** to move radially outward from the plug **100A**. The slips **114A** include teeth that engage the interior wall of the production conduit **106** to prevent upward movement of the plug **100A**. Many plugs include mechanical devices (e.g., shear pins, etc.) that ensure that actuation of the various components of the plug occurs in a desired order (e.g., actuation of bottom slips **122A** followed by deformation of sealing element **118A** followed by actuation of top slips **114A**, etc.). When the plug **100A** has been fully actuated, its position is maintained within the production conduit **106** by the friction force between the slips **114A**, **122A** and the production conduit **106** and the fluid pathway outside of the plug **100A** is sealed by the sealing element **118A**. Thus, the only fluid path from above the plug **100A** to below the plug **100A** is through the plug bore **128A**. While a general plug design has been shown for purposes of illustration, it will be understood that numerous other plug designs are employed to accomplish the same task.

After the plug **100A** has been set, the production conduit **106** is perforated to create a fluid pathway between the hydrocarbon-containing formation and the interior of the production conduit **106** (step **150C**). The perforations **132** penetrate through the production conduit **106** and typically extend at least some distance into the formation. Typically, perforations **132** are formed using a perforation gun **126A** (shown only symbolically in the example of FIG. 1). A perforation gun **126A** includes shape charges that, upon ignition (e.g., from the surface via a wireline), produce a jet of high pressure, high velocity gas that penetrates into the formation. In plug-and-perf operations, it is common for the perforation gun **126A** to be conveyed into the production conduit **106** on the same conveying apparatus **102** that is used to convey the plug **100A**, although this is not strictly necessary.

After the production conduit has been perforated above the plug **100A**, the conveying apparatus **102** and the perforating gun **126A** are removed from the well. To isolate the portion of the production conduit **106** above the plug **100A** from the portion below, a frac ball **134** is conveyed down the production conduit **106** in a fracture fluid (the frac ball having a slightly greater density than the fracture fluid) until it comes to rest on the ball seat **130** of the plug **100A** (step **150D**). The ball seat **130A** is complementary to the ball **134A**, which allows the ball **134A** to form a seal that prevents fluid from flowing downward through the bore **128A**. The fracture fluid flows into the formation through the

perforations **132**, and, as the pressure of the fracture fluid is increased (often to pressures of 10,000 psi or greater), fractures **136A** are formed in the formation in ZONE 1. Proppants in the fracture fluid hold the fractures **136A** open even after the fracture fluid is removed from the well, which enables hydrocarbons in the formation to be extracted more efficiently. It should be noted that the plug **100A** is exposed to the extreme pressures required to generate the fractures **136A** and therefore its components (including the ball **134A**) must maintain their mechanical integrity when exposed to such pressures to maintain the isolation of the production conduit **106** to ensure that the fracturing operation is focused on the intended zone.

After ZONE 1 has been fractured (i.e., fractures **136A** have been formed), plug **100B** is conveyed into the production conduit **106** on the conveying apparatus **102** to a desired location between the surface and the fractures **136A** (step **150E**). The process of plugging, perforating, and fracturing is then repeated to isolate and fracture each zone, moving in an uphole direction. When all of the zones have been fractured, the plugs must be milled or drilled out to enable hydrocarbons to flow to the surface of the well through the production conduit. While FIG. 1 illustrates a vertical portion of a well, hydraulic fracturing is often employed in horizontal portions of a well. It is not uncommon for a particular well, especially a horizontal well, to have 30-40 zones in which hydraulic fracturing is performed. Therefore, milling or drilling the numerous plugs can be a time-consuming and expensive operation. As such, there have been efforts to develop hydraulic fracturing techniques that avoid this requirement.

The first such technique employs sliding sleeve devices **200** as illustrated in FIG. 2. The sliding sleeve technique differs from the plug and perf technique in that the sliding sleeve devices **200** are integrated with the production conduit **106**. For example, each sliding sleeve device **200** may be threaded to a string of the production conduit **106** (e.g., a liner) at its top and bottom ends. In the illustrated example, the sliding sleeve devices **200** are installed as part of the production conduit **106** in an open (i.e., uncemented and uncased) wellbore **104**. In this type of application, the annulus between the production conduit **106** and the wellbore **104** may be sealed by packers **202** that separate the zones. Because the sliding sleeve devices **200** are integrated with the production conduit **106**, additional planning and labor (as compared to the plug and perf technique) are required during the completion process to ensure that the sliding sleeve devices **200** are adjacent to zones to be stimulated and the packers **202** separate the various zones.

Although the sliding sleeve technique requires additional planning and labor during the completion process, it also simplifies the hydraulic fracturing process. In its initial state, a sliding sleeve **212A** that is disposed within the body **214A** of the sliding sleeve device **200A** blocks radial ports **216A** that extend through the body **214A**, thus preventing fluid communication from the interior of the production conduit **106** to the wellbore **104** (step **250A**).

The hydraulic fracturing process is initiated by conveying a frac ball **234A** into the production conduit **106** with fracture fluid. This process is similar to the conveyance of the frac ball **134A** into the production conduit **106** in the plug and perf process described with respect to FIG. 1. However, in the sliding sleeve technique, each frac ball **234** must pass through each of the sliding sleeve devices **200** located uphole from the sliding sleeve device **200** with which the ball is designed to mate (i.e., the ball's corresponding sliding sleeve device). Therefore, a frac ball **234**

must have a diameter D_{234} that is smaller than the diameter D_{230} of each uphole ball seat **230** but greater than the diameter D_{230} of the ball seat **230** of its corresponding sliding sleeve device **200** (i.e., $D_{230D}, D_{230C},$ and $D_{230B} > D_{234A} > D_{230A}$). For this to be accomplished at each zone, the diameters D_{230} of the ball seats **230** must be progressively smaller at increasing distances from the surface of the well (i.e., $D_{230D} > D_{230C} > D_{230B} > D_{230A}$, etc.).

After the ball **234A** passes through the uphole sliding sleeve devices **200**, it comes to rest on the ball seat **230A** of the sliding sleeve device **200A** (step **250B**). Because the ball **234A** cannot pass through the seat **230A**, it forms a seal that prevents fluid from flowing downward through the sliding sleeve device **200A**. As the pressure of the fracture fluid is increased, it is exerted in a downward direction on the ball **234A**, which causes the sliding sleeve **212A** to shift downward until the shoulder **236A** of the sliding sleeve **212A** contacts the shoulder **238A** of the body of the sliding sleeve device **200A** (step **250C**). In the shifted position, the radial ports **216A** are open to the interior of the sliding sleeve device **200A**, thus enabling fluid communication from the interior of the production conduit **106** to the wellbore **104**. The fracture fluid flows into the formation through the radial ports **216A**, but the ball **230A** continues to prevent fluid flow through the sliding sleeve device **200A** and the packers **202A** (not shown) and **202B** prevent fluid flow in the annulus between the production conduit **106** and the wellbore **104**. Consequently, the pressure of the fracture fluid acts only on the formation within ZONE 1, and, as the pressure is increased (often to pressures of 10,000 psi or greater), fractures **136A** are formed in the formation. Just as with the plug and perf technique described above, proppants in the fracture fluid hold the fractures **136A** open even after the fracture fluid is removed from the well, which enables hydrocarbons in the formation to be extracted more efficiently. Here again, it should be noted that the sliding sleeve device **200A** is exposed to the extreme pressures required to generate the fractures **136A** and therefore its components (including the ball **234A**) must maintain their mechanical integrity when exposed to such pressures to maintain the isolation of the production conduit **106** to ensure that the fracturing operation is focused on the intended zone.

After ZONE 1 has been fractured (i.e., fractures **136A** have been formed), the sliding sleeve process is repeated for the immediate uphole sliding sleeve device **200B** (steps **250D** through **250F**) to isolate and fracture each zone, moving in the uphole direction. After all of the zones have been fractured, fluid is circulated in the reverse direction (i.e., the uphole direction) to remove the balls **234** from the production conduit. While the sliding sleeve technique is designed to eliminate the need for milling or drilling components after hydraulic fracturing is complete, it is not uncommon for a ball **234** to become lodged at some point in the production conduit **106**. Again, while FIG. 2 illustrates a vertical portion of a well, the sliding sleeve technique is often employed in horizontal wells, which increases the difficulty in deploying and retrieving the balls **234**. If a ball **234** does become lodged, it may not be possible to retrieve any of the balls that are located downhole of the lodged ball **234**. Therefore, it may still be necessary to mill or drill the balls **234** to enable hydrocarbons to be produced.

Therefore, balls and tool components that are dissolvable or degradable in certain fluids have been introduced for use in either plug and perf or sliding sleeve hydraulic fracturing jobs. As noted above, the balls and tool components are subjected to extreme pressures during the hydraulic fracturing process. Therefore, degradable components must be

capable of withstanding these conditions before they degrade. Various different types of degradable components have been introduced.

Bubbletight, LLC, assignee of the present application, manufactures tools and balls using a degradable composite metal. The degradable composite metal has exceptional strength characteristics and is useful in a variety of applications. However, it requires a high chloride solution or an acidic solution to degrade in a reasonable time period and it is relatively expensive.

Polymers have also been utilized to manufacture degradable downhole tools and components. One notable degradable polymer that has been utilized for tools and balls is polyglycolic acid (PGA). While PGA has reasonable strength and is less expensive than degradable metal balls, it requires high temperatures (>180° F.) to degrade and even under those conditions it degrades slowly. Polylactic acid (PLA) has also been suggested for use in downhole tools. However, PLA exhibits poor strength and poor degradability and therefore downhole applications have generally been limited to use as a diverter polymer.

While degradable balls and tools have been described in the context of their use in hydraulic fracturing operations, there are also other operations in which degradable downhole tools may be employed. There is therefore a need in the art for degradable downhole tools and components that have desirable strength and degradability properties.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a diagram illustrating the steps of a plug and perf hydraulic fracturing operation.

FIG. 2 is a diagram illustrating the steps of a sliding sleeve hydraulic fracturing operation.

FIG. 3 is a graph showing the strength and elasticity of components utilizable in degradable downhole tools and components in accordance with an embodiment of the disclosure.

FIG. 4 is a cross-sectional view of a plug and ball that may be formed wholly or partially from a degradable material in accordance with an embodiment of this disclosure.

FIGS. 5A and 5B illustrate modified sealing elements for a plug that are formed from a degradable material in accordance with an embodiment of this disclosure.

FIG. 6 is a flowchart that illustrates the steps of an injection molding process for producing tools and other components from a degradable material in accordance with an embodiment of this disclosure.

FIG. 7 is a flowchart that illustrates the steps of an extrusion process for producing tools and other components from a degradable material in accordance with an embodiment of this disclosure.

DESCRIPTION

In the preceding description as well as the description that follows, corresponding items (i.e., different instances of the same type of item) are labeled using the same numeric designator. Where necessary for purposes of clarity, different instances of corresponding items are labeled with a suffix following the numeric designator. Throughout the disclosure, the suffix may be omitted when describing an item generically rather than a specific instance of the item.

The inventor has determined that polyvinyl alcohol (PVA) exhibits desirable strength and degradability properties for use in tools, tool components, and balls for downhole applications. In particular, and as will be described in greater

detail below, the inventor has determined that fiberglass-reinforced PVA compounds can be utilized to create downhole tools, tool components, and balls that exhibit desirable strength and degradability properties. In addition, the inventor has determined that certain PVA compounds can also be utilized to manufacture degradable sealing elements (i.e., flexible components).

PVA is a water-soluble polymer having an ideal formula of $[\text{CH}_2\text{CH}(\text{OH})]_n$. PVA's repeat unit includes a hydroxyl functional group having a random stereochemistry along the polymer chain (i.e., PVA is atactic). PVA is generally produced by a two-step process: 1) the polymerization of vinyl acetate to form polyvinyl acetate and 2) the hydrolysis of the acetate groups in the polyvinyl acetate to form PVA. The properties of PVA are highly dependent on its molecular weight and the degree of hydrolysis (i.e., the percentage of acetate groups that are hydrolyzed). The molecular weight of PVA is controlled by controlling the vinyl acetate polymerization reaction and the degree of hydrolysis is controlled by controlling the extent of the hydrolysis reaction. As molecular weight and/or the degree of hydrolysis increases, PVA exhibits increased viscosity, increased tensile strength, and increased water and solvent resistance. As molecular weight and/or the degree of hydrolysis decreases, PVA exhibits decreased viscosity, increased flexibility, and increased solubility. PVA can be categorized based upon its degree of hydrolysis as fully hydrolyzed (e.g., >97 mol %), medium hydrolyzed (e.g., 95 to 97 mol %), and partially hydrolyzed (e.g., 85 to 95 mol %).

The inventor has specifically observed beneficial properties of the following raw PVA compounds for uses in different applications in downhole operations: Kuraray Mowiflex C 17 (formerly Mowiflex TC 253), Kuraray Mowiflex C 30 (formerly Mowiflex TC 232), and Kuraray Mowiflex H 15. The Mowiflex C 17 PVA compound contains greater than 96 wt % PVA and has a glass transition temperature of 62° C., a density of 0.6 to 0.9 g/cm³, and a melt flow index of 14-20 g/10 min at 190° C. and a load of 21.6 kg. The Mowiflex C 30 PVA compound contains approximately 75 wt % PVA, 20 wt % aliphatic polyols (plasticizer), and 5 wt % calcium stearate (lubricant) and has a glass transition temperature of 35° C., a density of 0.6 to 0.9 g/cm³, and a melt flow index of 20-40 g/10 min at 190° C. and a load of 21.6 kg. The Mowiflex H 15 PVA compound has a melt flow index of approximately 15 g/10 min at 230° C. and a load of 2.16 kg. The melt flow index values of these raw PVA compounds may be determined in accordance with the ASTM D1238 and/or ISO 1133 test procedures. The properties of the C 17 and C 30 raw PVA compounds are listed in data sheets that are attached as Exhibit A and Exhibit B of the incorporated '316 Application, respectively. While these specific grades of PVA compounds are described for purposes of illustration, it will be understood that other types and grades of raw PVA compounds are also suitable materials for manufacturing the types of tools, tool components, and balls for downhole operations described in this application. As used herein, the term raw PVA compound refers to an initial material that contains an appreciable quantity of PVA (such as those described above), which is typically supplied by a PVA manufacturer in powder or pelletized form and which can be shaped into a final product or further processed before final shaping. It will be appreciated from the above examples that raw PVA compounds may include materials other than PVA and may include PVA of varying molecular weights and degrees of hydrolysis. Raw PVA compounds can be processed by blending with other polymers and/or adding colorants, fill-

ers, reinforcing materials, or other additional materials to obtain a processed PVA compound having the desired properties. Thus, as used herein, the term processed PVA compound refers to a PVA compound that has been processed to include these various additional materials and may exist as a pellet, a melt, a powder, or a final shaped component. The term PVA compound may refer to either a raw PVA compound or a processed PVA compound.

Referring to FIG. 3, the inventor has observed that a processed PVA compound that includes a fiberglass reinforcing material exhibits strength and elasticity properties that are comparable to materials that are used in the manufacture of commercially available degradable downhole components. For example, the fiberglass-reinforced processed PVA compound has a tensile strength of approximately 30,000 psi, which exceeds the tensile strength of pure PVA (approximately 14,000 psi), PGA (approximately 16,000 psi), and PA6 (Nylon 6) (approximately 12,000 psi). The fiberglass-reinforced processed PVA compound additionally exhibits a flexural strength of approximately 47,000 psi, which exceeds the flexural strength of pure PVA (approximately 21,000 psi), PGA (approximately 28,000 psi), and PA6 (Nylon 6) (approximately 12,300 psi). As such, the fiberglass-reinforced processed PVA compound's strength characteristics render it suitable for use in manufacturing degradable downhole tools, tool components, and balls. It has also been observed that the elasticity of the fiberglass-reinforced processed PVA compound renders it suitable for use in downhole applications while also decreasing the susceptibility of components manufactured from the processed PVA compound to shear failure. The specific gravity of components and balls produced from the fiberglass-reinforced processed PVA compound is approximately 1.6 to 1.7, which allows balls produced from the processed PVA compound to be conveyed downhole in standard fracture fluids. As will be described in greater detail below, the specific gravity of balls and components manufactured from the fiberglass-reinforced processed PVA compound can be altered to meet specific requirements by making minor modifications to the manufacturing process.

In addition, the fiberglass-reinforced processed PVA compound exhibits superior degradability relative to existing degradable downhole tools and components. In a test environment, a $\frac{7}{8}$ " diameter ball was observed to completely dissolve in 175° F. water in eight hours while another $\frac{7}{8}$ " diameter ball was reduced to $\frac{5}{8}$ " diameter in 24 hours in 70° F. water. Components formed from the fiberglass-reinforced processed PVA compound begin to degrade (i.e., dissolve) in water at ambient conditions (i.e., 70° F.). Relatively low temperature fracture fluid has little or no effect on the structural integrity of components formed from the fiberglass-reinforced processed PVA compound. However, when such components are exposed to fluids at increased temperatures, they degrade quickly. These properties make the fiberglass-reinforced processed PVA compound ideally suited for use in downhole applications such as hydraulic fracturing because the temperature of the fresh fracture fluid acts to inhibit degradation of the components during the hydraulic fracture operation and to enable degradation after the operation is complete and fluid temperatures increase. The degradation rate of the fiberglass-reinforced processed PVA compound can be modified through the addition of a material such as polyethylene or PA6. Moreover, PVA is biodegradable and is harmless at the extremely low concentrations that would result from the dissolution of relatively

small components in a large volume of fluid. In addition, the small quantities of glass fibers are flushed back to the surface and are largely undetectable.

Referring to FIG. 4, a cross-sectional view of a plug 400 and a ball 434 for use in a downhole operation (e.g., a hydraulic fracturing operation) is depicted. The ball 434 and the components of the plug 400 are examples of components that may be formed from a PVA compound. It will be noted that the plug 400 has the same structure as the plugs 100 described above with respect to FIG. 1. The structure of the plug 400 depicted in FIG. 4 is provided for purposes of illustration only and is not intended to be limiting. Rather, and as will be described in greater detail below, the manufacturing processes associated with PVA compounds enable the creation of structures having practically any shape or size. Thus, using the manufacturing processes disclosed herein, a degradable version of nearly any existing or newly-conceived downhole tool or tool component may be generated from a PVA compound by molding or extruding and machining components of tools that are currently manufactured from different materials. It will be understood that such components can be utilized to perform the operations described above with respect to FIGS. 1 and 2 (i.e., plug and perf and sliding sleeve hydraulic fracturing) as well as other downhole operations in which degradable components may be useful.

As described above with respect to FIG. 1, the main body of the plug 400 is formed by a mandrel 410 through which an axial bore extends and about which additional components are arranged. Again, these additional components include upper and lower shoulders 412 and 424, slips 414 and 422, cones 416 and 420, and sealing element 418. In one embodiment, each component of the plug 400 as well as the ball 434 may be formed from a PVA compound. For example, in one embodiment, the ball 434 and the structural components of the plug 400 (mandrel 410, shoulders 412 and 424, slips 414 and 422, and cones 416 and 420) may be formed from a rigid fiberglass-reinforced PVA compound, which may be produced from a long fiber reinforced or a short fiber reinforced PVA compound with 5-60 wt % fiberglass. It has been determined that PVA compounds in which the PVA component has a higher molecular weight and/or a higher degree of hydrolysis (e.g., medium or fully hydrolyzed), such as the Mowiflex C 17 compound, are particularly well-suited for use in manufacturing such structural components, although other PVA compounds are also suitable. While the ball 434 and structural components of the plug may be formed from a PVA compound that includes a reinforcing material such as fiberglass, the reinforcing material is not essential and the ball 434 and structural components of the plug may also be formed from a PVA compound that does not include a reinforcing material.

In one embodiment, the sealing element 418 may be formed from a more flexible PVA compound. Therefore, the mandrel 410, shoulders 412 and 424, slips 414 and 422, and/or cones 416 and 420, may be formed from a first PVA compound and the sealing element 418 may be formed from a second, different PVA compound. It has been determined that PVA compounds in which the PVA component has a lower molecular weight and/or a lower degree of hydrolysis (e.g., partially hydrolyzed) or that include a plasticizer (e.g., a polyol plasticizer), such as the Mowiflex C 30 compound, are particularly well-suited for use in manufacturing such flexible components, although other PVA compounds are also suitable. The C 30 compound is both flexible enough that it can be utilized to form components that are used to generate fluid tight seals and strong enough to maintain such

fluid tight seals even at the elevated pressures that are observed in downhole operations such as hydraulic fracturing.

It has been determined that various modifications can be made to increase the effectiveness of a sealing element **418** that is formed from a PVA compound. These modifications are intended to decrease hardness, prevent premature degradation, and prevent extrusion of the sealing element **418**. The modifications include modifications to the PVA compound from which the sealing element **418** is formed as well as modifications to the structure of the sealing element **418** itself.

A first type of modification seeks to decrease the hardness of the sealing element **418**. It has been observed that a sealing element **418** that is formed from the Mowiflex C 30 PVA compound alone exhibits a hardness of approximately 97 Shore A, and its hardness decreases only slightly at increased temperatures (e.g., to approximately 94 Shore A at 200° F.). It is believed that this elevated hardness may prevent the sealing element **418** from establishing a full compression seal (i.e., from fully expanding to sealingly engage the wall of a wellbore conduit) when the plug **400** is set.

The hardness of the sealing element **418** may be decreased through the addition of a styrene-rubber polymer additive, which is a copolymer that includes polystyrene and rubber. In one embodiment, the styrene-rubber polymer additive may be a block copolymer such as a styrene-ethylene/butylene-styrene (SEBS) or a styrene-ethylene/propylene-styrene (SEPS) polymer such as those manufactured by Kraton. In one embodiment, Kraton's FG1924 GT polymer, which is a linear triblock copolymer based on styrene and ethylene/butylene with a styrene/rubber ratio of 13/87, is mixed with the Mowiflex C 30 PVA compound in an amount in which the resulting processed PVA compound includes 50 wt % of the styrene-rubber polymer. The resulting processed PVA compound exhibits a hardness at room temperature of approximately 92 Shore A, and the hardness decreases significantly at elevated temperatures (e.g., to approximately 75 Shore A at 200° F.). The addition of the styrene-rubber polymer additive decreases the glass transition temperature (as compared to the material manufactured from the Mowiflex C 30 PVA compound alone) and does not retard the degradation of the material. A data sheet showing the properties of the Kraton FG1924 GT polymer is provided in Exhibit C of the incorporated '316 Application. While the Kraton FG1924 GT polymer has been described, it will be understood that other styrene-rubber polymers might also be employed. In addition, different types of degradation/impact modifiers may be utilized to decrease the hardness and glass transition temperature of a PVA compound. By way of example, materials such as Dupont's Surlyn 9320 or Fusabond N493 may be utilized in similar concentrations to the above-described styrene-rubber polymer to achieve similar results. Dupont's Surlyn 9320 is an ionomer of ethylene acid acrylate terpolymer, and its data sheet is provided in Exhibit D of the incorporated '316 Application. Dupont's Fusabond N493 is an anhydride modified ethylene copolymer, and its data sheet is provided in Exhibit E of the incorporated '316 Application.

The hardness and density of the sealing element **418** may also be decreased through the addition of a chemical foaming agent. In one embodiment, Bergen International's Foamazol 92 chemical foaming agent is added to the processed PVA compound formed from equal parts of the Kraton FG1924 GT styrene-rubber polymer and the Mowiflex C 30 compound in an amount equal to 2 wt % of the processed

PVA compound. Upon exposure to increased temperatures (such as those encountered in injection molding or extrusion processes described below), a chemical foaming agent generates a gas. The addition of the chemical foaming agent significantly reduces the hardness and density of the resulting processed PVA compound. A data sheet showing the properties of the Bergen Foamazol 92 chemical foaming agent is provided in Exhibit F of the incorporated '316 Application. While the Bergen Foamazol 92 chemical foaming agent has been described, it will be understood that other chemical foaming agents (including endothermic, exothermic, organic, and inorganic chemical foaming agents) may be employed. As used herein, a chemical foaming agent is a material that facilitates the formation of foam by liberating gas (such as nitrogen, carbon dioxide, etc.) upon exposure to elevated temperatures.

The hardness of the sealing element **418** may also be decreased through the addition of further plasticizer (i.e., in addition to any plasticizer that is present in the raw PVA compound). In one embodiment, the Mowiflex C 30 PVA compound is mixed with Poly[4,4'-methylenebis(phenyl isocyanate)-alt-1,4-butanediol/di(propylene glycol)/polycaprolactone] plasticizer in an amount in which the resulting processed PVA compound includes 14 wt % of the plasticizer. The resulting processed PVA compound exhibits a hardness at room temperature of approximately 94 Shore A, and the hardness decreases at elevated temperatures (e.g., to approximately 86 Shore A at 200° F.). A data sheet showing the properties of the added plasticizer material is provided in Exhibit G of the incorporated '316 Application. The data sheet for another suitable plasticizer, Trimethylolpropane, is provided in Exhibit H of the incorporated '316 Application. Although these particular plasticizer materials have been described, it will be understood that other plasticizer materials might also be employed.

To further assist in the creation of a fluid-tight seal, the sealing element **418** may be formed from a processed PVA compound having a swelling compound that causes the sealing element **418** to increase in size when it is immersed in water. In one embodiment, the sealing element **418** is formed from a processed PVA compound having 1-25 wt % Evonik Creabloc SIS swelling compound. A data sheet showing the properties of the Evonik Creabloc SIS swelling compound is provided in Exhibit I of the incorporated '316 Application. Although a particular swelling compound has been described, it will be understood that other swelling compounds might also be employed.

The premature degradation of the sealing element **418** may be addressed through the addition of polycaprolactam (PA6 or Nylon-6), which results in the decrease of degradation rates by as much as 80% (as compared to the raw PVA compound) without significantly changing the mechanical properties. In one embodiment, the Mowiflex C 30 PVA compound is mixed with PA6 in an amount in which the resulting processed PVA compound includes 10 wt % PA6. The resulting processed PVA compound exhibits significantly reduced degradation rates. In another embodiment, a processed PVA compound consisting of equal weights of the Mowiflex C 30 PVA compound and the Kraton FG1924 GT polymer is mixed with PA6 in an amount in which the resulting processed PVA compound includes 10 wt % PA6. The resulting processed PVA compound exhibits a significantly reduced degradation rate and a hardness at room temperature of approximately 94 Shore A, which hardness decreases significantly at elevated temperatures (e.g., to approximately 79 Shore A at 200° F.). In one embodiment, the polycaprolactam may be an elastomeric type of poly-

caprolactam. As used herein, an elastomeric polycaprolactam exhibits greater than 100% strain at break and has a hardness of less than 70 Shore D.

The addition of compounds such as a styrene-rubber polymer (or other degradation/impact modifier), a chemical foaming agent, a plasticizer, a swelling compound, and/or PA6 in desired quantities results in a processed PVA compound with flexibility, hardness, and degradability properties that are well-suited for use as the sealing element **418**. One or more of the described additives may be mixed with a PVA compound (in any combination of one or more listed additives with a PVA compound) in different ratios to achieve a processed PVA compound having the desired properties of the sealing element **418**. For example, the sealing element **418** may be formed from a processed PVA compound that includes between 5 wt % and 70 wt % styrene-rubber polymer, between 20 wt % and 60 wt % styrene-rubber polymer, between 30 wt % and 60 wt % styrene-rubber polymer, between 40 wt % and 60 wt % styrene-rubber polymer, or between 45 wt % and 55 wt % styrene-rubber polymer. A sealing element with a styrene-rubber polymer additive may have a hardness at 70° F. of between 88 and 96 Shore A, between 90 and 94 Shore A, or between 91 and 92 Shore A. A sealing element with a styrene-rubber polymer additive may have a hardness at 200° F. of between 70 and 80 Shore A, between 72 and 78 Shore A, or between 74 and 76 Shore A.

The sealing element **418** may also be formed from a processed PVA compound that includes between 5 wt % and 25 wt % PA6, between 5 wt % and 15 wt % PA6, or between 8 wt % and 12 wt % PA6. The sealing element **418** may also be formed from a processed PVA compound that includes between 5 wt % and 20 wt % plasticizer (in addition to any plasticizer in the raw PVA compound), between 10 wt % and 15 wt % plasticizer (in addition to any plasticizer in the raw PVA compound), or between 13 wt % and 15 wt % plasticizer (in addition to any plasticizer in the raw PVA compound). The sealing element **418** may also be formed from a processed PVA compound that includes between 1 wt % and 25 wt % swelling compound, between 5 wt % and 20 wt % swelling compound, or between 10 wt % and 15 wt % swelling compound. The sealing element **418** may also be formed from a processed PVA compound that includes between 0.5 wt % and 5 wt % chemical foaming agent, between 1 wt % and 3 wt % chemical foaming agent, or between 1.5 wt % and 2.5 wt % chemical foaming agent. Each of the additives (e.g., a styrene-rubber polymer, a chemical foaming agent, a plasticizer, a swelling compound, and/or PA6) may be obtained in a pelletized form (although other forms may also be used), and the additives may be mixed with the PVA compound during or prior to the injection molding or extrusion of the sealing element **418**. A sealing element **418** (or a portion thereof) that is formed using any one or more of the described additives (except a chemical foaming agent) is described as being formed from a PVA compound that includes or comprises the one or more additives regardless of the specific composition of the components in the processed PVA compound. A sealing element **418** (or a portion thereof) that is formed using a chemical foaming agent is described as being formed from a PVA compound that is produced using the chemical foaming agent.

FIG. 5A illustrates the structure of a modified sealing element **418'** that is designed to prevent extrusion of the modified sealing element **418'** when the plug **400** is set. As illustrated in FIG. 5A, the modified sealing element **418'** includes back-up rings **450** at its upper and lower ends and

a sealing portion **452** that is positioned between the back-up rings **450**. The back-up rings may be constructed from a rigid PVA compound (e.g., medium or fully hydrolyzed) such as the Mowiflex C 17 PVA compound, either with or without fiberglass reinforcement. The back-up rings **450** may be injection molded or extruded (and then shaped) using the techniques described below, and they provide a hard, strong surface that prevents the extrusion of the sealing portion **452** of the modified sealing element **418'** when the plug **400** is set. The back-up rings **450** may be placed into the mold cavity for the modified sealing element **418'**, and the sealing portion **452** may be injection molded onto the back-up rings **450** such that the back-up rings **450** and the sealing portion **452** are chemically adhered to each other. The sealing portion **452** of the modified sealing element may be formed from a processed PVA compound that is softer (and thus better-suited for providing a fluid seal) than the PVA compound of the back-up rings **450**. For example, the sealing portion **452** may be formed from a processed PVA compound that is formed from the combination of a raw PVA compound such as the Mowiflex C 30 PVA compound and one or more of the additives (e.g., a styrene-rubber polymer, a chemical foaming agent, a plasticizer, a swelling compound, and/or PA6) described above.

FIG. 5B illustrates the structure of a modified sealing element **418''**. Like the sealing element **418'**, the sealing element **418''** includes back-up rings **450** and a sealing portion **452**. However, an additional back-up sealing portion **454** is positioned between the back-up rings **450** and the sealing portion **452**. The back-up sealing portions **454** are designed to provide an additional layer of protection against the extrusion of the sealing portion **452** while also providing some sealing effect. The back-up sealing portions **454** may be formed from a material having a hardness that is between that of the back-up rings **450** and the sealing portion **452**. Thus, the sealing element **418''** is formed from three components that decrease in hardness from the outer ends to the middle. The back-up sealing portion **454** may have a hardness that prevents it from being prone to extrusion while also enabling some degree of compression to provide a fluid seal (e.g., 95 Shore A at 70° F.). In one embodiment, the back-up sealing portion **454** may be formed from the Mowiflex C 30 PVA compound without any of the above-described additives while the back-up rings **450** and the sealing portion **452** may be formed from the compounds described above with respect to FIG. 5A. As described above, different components of the sealing element **418''** can be injection molded onto previously-created components such that the components are chemically adhered to each other. While the modified sealing element **418''** is illustrated as having three components having different degrees of hardness, it will be understood that additional components can be included. For example, a sealing element could be formed having more than three components, each having different degrees of hardness.

Returning to FIG. 4, while the described plug **400** may be constructed completely from PVA materials, in one embodiment, certain components may be wholly constructed from other materials (either degradable or non-degradable). For example, one or more of the components of the plug **400** may be wholly constructed from another degradable material such as a degradable metal or a different degradable polymer. Likewise, one or more components of the plug **400** may be wholly constructed from a non-degradable material. For example, it may be desirable to form components such as slips **414** and **422**, which are configured to engage an interior wall of a conduit to maintain the position of the plug

400 within the conduit, from a non-degradable metal. Likewise, the slips 414 and 422 may be formed primarily from a degradable metal, but the gripping surface (i.e., the surface that engages the conduit) may be formed from an abrasive material such as Tungsten carbide. In such an embodiment, the abrasive material may be deposited onto the degradable composite metal material using a deposition process such as cold-spray deposition or by using an electroplating process. Similarly, while sealing element 418 may be made degradable by forming it from a PVA compound as described above, it may be desirable in some applications to utilize a more traditional material for sealing such as nitrile rubber.

In another embodiment, one or more of the components of the plug 400 may be partially formed from materials other than PVA compounds. For example, while slips 414 and 422 are depicted with integral teeth (i.e., the slips are depicted as a single component having teeth), in one embodiment, the slips 414' and 422' may be formed from a PVA compound and may be designed with recessed pockets 428 in which teeth formed of a more traditional gripping material (e.g., a metal or ceramic material) may be inset (e.g., with an epoxy). This may allow the main body of the slips 414' and 422' to be degradable while the portion that contacts the conduit may be formed from a material that is better-suited for gripping a metallic surface such as the interior of a conduit.

In another embodiment in which a component of the plug 400 may be partially formed from materials other than a PVA compound, an alternative mandrel 410' may include a central insert 432 that is formed from a PVA compound while the exterior portion of the mandrel 410' is formed from a non-degradable material. In such an embodiment, the other plug components (i.e., the components other than the mandrel 410') may also be formed from non-degradable materials. For example, the heavy-walled portion of a traditional mandrel 410 (i.e., the interior portion of the mandrel from the ball seat 430 to the bottom of plug 400) may be replaced with the insert 432. In such an embodiment, the mandrel 410' may be machined with internal threads (not shown) to accept complementary external threads (not shown) that are machined into the insert 432. The resulting plug may be permanently maintained in a well, while a degradable ball (such as PVA ball 434) and the insert portion 432 of the mandrel 410' degrade to create a large bore in the permanent mandrel 410' to facilitate flow through the plug after use in a downhole operation such as hydraulic fracturing.

As will be described below, the ball 434 and the components of the plug 400 may be formed using an injection molding process. Likewise, the ball 434 and the components of the plug 400 may be formed using an extrusion process and then machined (if necessary) to a final form. Moreover, and as mentioned above, ball 434 and plug 400 are illustrated only as an example of the types of tools and components that can be created from PVA compounds using the injection molding and extrusion processes described below. Other examples of tools that may be created from a PVA compound using the disclosed processes include cement retainers, sliding sleeve devices, and other isolation tools.

Referring to FIG. 6, a flow chart illustrates the steps in a process 500 for producing tools, tool components, and balls from a PVA compound by injection molding. Initially, a desired raw or processed PVA compound is obtained (step 502), typically in a pellet or powder form. It is beneficial at this point to discuss the different processing that can be performed to obtain the various types of processed PVA compounds that may be utilized in the injection molding and extrusion processes.

As described above, a reinforcing material can be integrated into a raw PVA compound to improve strength. The reinforcing material may include fiberglass, carbon fiber, an aramid fiber such as Kevlar, Basalt fiber, or other similar reinforcing materials. In one embodiment, the raw PVA compound is processed to generate a long fiber reinforced PVA compound. Long fiber reinforced materials are defined by their incorporation of substantially parallel fibers (such as glass fibers) that are all of the same length as each other and as the plastic component (e.g., the pellet). Long fiber reinforced polymer pellets are typically produced by a specialty provider through a process such as pultrusion, which essentially results in the coating of the reinforcing fiber with the raw or processed polymer compound. The Kuraray Mowiflex C 17 raw PVA compound and other similar raw PVA compounds are well-suited for use in creating a long fiber reinforced PVA compound to be used to form rigid components. In one embodiment, the long fiber reinforced PVA compound is 50 wt % fiberglass. However, the fiberglass content may range from 5-60 wt %. In one embodiment, the long fiber reinforced PVA pellets have a diameter of 1/8" and a length of 1/2" (e.g., similar to a grain of rice).

In contrast to long fiber reinforced materials, short fiber reinforced materials are defined by their incorporation of various lengths of fibers that are randomly oriented within the plastic material. PVA compounds can also be processed to generate a short fiber reinforced PVA compound. Short fiber reinforced PVA compounds can be created during the compounding stage, the injection molding process 500, or extrusion process 600 by mixing short glass fibers with the PVA compound in the injection molding or extrusion hopper. As with long fiber reinforced PVA compounds, short fiber reinforced PVA compounds may include a fiberglass content of 50 wt %, or a fiberglass content within a range from 5-60 wt %. The short and long fiber reinforced PVA compounds may include multi-compatible, standard e-glass solid fibers that are 17 microns in filament diameter, although other sizes (such as 5-17 micron diameter) and types of fibers may also be used. The content of reinforcing material may be altered to obtain desired strength and specific gravity measures of components generated from the processed PVA compound.

PVA compounds can also be processed by blending the PVA compound (such as the above-described C 17, C 30, and H 15 compounds) with another polymer (i.e., a blend polymer) or other type of additive. For example, the PVA compound can be blended with one of the polymers or other additives described above with respect to modifications of the sealing element. Similarly, the PVA compound can be blended with a polymer such as PGA, PLA, and/or polyethylene to obtain desired properties (e.g., degradation rate, specific gravity, tensile strength, etc.). As described above with respect to the modifications of the sealing element 418, it has been observed that blending a PVA compound with Nylon-6 (PA6 or polycaprolactam) results in the decrease of degradation rates by as much as 80% (as compared to the non-blended PVA compound) without significantly changing the mechanical properties. The PVA compound may include 1-25 wt % PA6, or, more specifically, between 1-3 wt %, 4-6 wt %, 9-11 wt %, 14-16 wt %, 19-21 wt %, or 24-25 wt % (excluding reinforcing or other fill materials) PA6. When reinforcing or other fill materials are included, the processed PVA compound may include approximately 0.5-24 wt % PA6. PA6 and other polymers are blended with the PVA compound by melting the PVA compound and the blend polymer together in the appropriate ratio and obtaining a uniform mixture. The blending process may be accomplished during the injection molding or extrusion process by

mixing the blend polymer with the PVA compound in the hopper in the desired ratio. The blending process may also be accomplished as part of the addition of other materials such as reinforcing materials. For example, a specialty provider of long fiber reinforced pellets may add the blend polymer to the PVA compound during the creation of the long fiber reinforced pellets.

In addition to blend polymers, reinforcing materials, and other additives, other materials such as colorant and fill materials can be added to PVA compounds. In one embodiment, an ethylene-vinyl acetate (EVA) carrier polymer with a desired color concentrate is added to the PVA compound. Colorants have been added to PVA compounds in ratios of 0-3 wt % (excluding reinforcing or other fill materials but including any blend polymers). A colorant can be used to generate a PVA compound having a color that distinguishes it from other grades or types. Fill materials such as talc, calcium carbonate, glass powder, glass spheres, gas bubbles, or other metal or ceramic powder can also be added to the PVA compound in ratios of 5-60 wt % to obtain desired characteristics such as specific gravity. In one embodiment, the specific gravity of components produced from the PVA compound may be reduced by incorporating hollow glass spheres to create void spaces. Injecting gas bubbles into the melt using a process like MuCell by Trexel Corporation can also decrease the apparent specific gravity of the finished product without compromising strength. Alternatively, metal powders, degradable and not, can be added to the polymer to increase the apparent specific gravity of the finished product. Like blend polymers and reinforcing material, fill materials and colorants can be added to the PVA compound during the injection molding process 500 or the extrusion process 600 or during the addition of reinforcing material. Colorants and fill materials may also be present in raw PVA compounds. While several different types of processed PVA compounds have been described, tools, tool components, and balls may also be produced from raw PVA compounds using the injection molding process 500 and the extrusion process 600.

The obtained raw or processed PVA compound (as well as any additional materials that are to be added during the injection molding process 500) is placed into the hopper of an injection molding machine (step 504) from where it is admitted into a heating section of the injection molding machine (step 506). In one embodiment, the heating section of the injection molding machine includes six to eight heater bands, although more or fewer heater bands might also be used. The heating section imparts thermal energy into the PVA compound and creates a molten PVA mixture that is conveyed through the heating section. The PVA material is conveyed through the heating section by a screw. In one embodiment, the temperature of each band of the heating section can be individually controlled. In one embodiment, the heater bands are controlled to increase the temperature from approximately 380° F. at the first heater band (i.e., the heater band closest to the hopper) to 400° F. at the last heater band (i.e., the heater band closest to the shot), although other temperature settings and gradients may be appropriate depending on the properties of the specific PVA compound.

As the molten PVA compound is conveyed through the heating section (i.e., via the rotation of the screw), it begins to fill the shot (step 508). The shot is a portion of the injection molding machine between the end of the screw that conveys material through the heating section and the entrance to the mold (i.e., the gate). The material in the shot is injected into the mold (step 510) by sliding the screw forward towards the shot. Typically, the volume of the shot

slightly exceeds the volume of the mold such that the screw does not bottom out (i.e., there is always some material in the shot). It will be understood that a mold can be created to form practically any three dimensional component from the PVA compound. For example, any of the components of the plug 400 illustrated in FIG. 4 or the modified sealing elements illustrated in FIG. 5 can be created via the injection molding process 500. The inventor has determined that the injection molding process 500 is particularly well-suited for the formation of balls 434 from a processed PVA compound containing long fiber fiberglass reinforcing material (with or without additional fill materials, colorants, etc.). Typically, the mold is made of either steel or aluminum, although other mold materials might also be employed. In one embodiment, the mold for ball 434 includes a feature such as an annular dovetail opposite the entrance to the mold to provide a pulling surface that allows the ball 434 to be extracted without damaging the portion of the ball 434 nearest the entrance of the mold. Similar features may also be included in molds for other components. The resulting features may then be removed from the completed part during final processing.

In one embodiment, the PVA compound in the shot is transferred into the mold through a large orifice. For example, the orifice may have a diameter of $\frac{3}{8}$ ". Using a large orifice decreases the shear forces exerted on the PVA compound and reduces the likelihood that any included reinforcing materials such as glass fibers will fracture as the material is introduced into the mold. For the same reasons, the rate of injection into the mold (as determined by the rate of advancement of the screw into the shot) may also be decreased to a very slow rate. For example, the PVA compound may be introduced into the mold at a rate of approximately 0.01 in³/sec. After the mold has been completely filled, the screw may exert and hold high pressure on the material in the mold. In one embodiment, the pack and hold pressure exerted by the screw is 20,000 psi. In another embodiment, the pack and hold pressure exerted by the screw may range from 10,000 psi to 20,000 psi, although other settings may also be used. The pack and hold pressure may be varied to slightly vary the specific gravity of the injection molded component.

After the screw is held in place to maintain the pack and hold pressure for several seconds, the material in the gate (the entrance to the mold cavity) begins to solidify. When this occurs, the screw may begin to be retracted. The PVA compound in the mold is allowed to cool to form a solid component (step 514). The residence time in the mold is dependent upon the volume of the PVA compound in the mold as well as the content of reinforcing material. Molds with larger volumes and PVA compounds having a higher content of reinforcing materials require longer residence times in the mold to solidify. By way of example, a 50 wt % fiberglass ball having a diameter of 3½" to 4" may require approximately 3-4 minutes of residence time to solidify while a 50 wt % fiberglass ball having a diameter of 2" may require 1-2 minutes of residence time to solidify. When the PVA compound in the mold has been allowed to cool for the proper time, the component may be removed from the mold (step 516). If an additional component is to be created (the "Yes" prong of step 512), the shot is refilled (step 508) as the screw is retracted (i.e., the screw is rotated to introduce material into the shot as it is retracted). In one embodiment, the shot is refilled at the same rate as the screw is retracted. Moreover, the screw may be retracted at a rate that corresponds to the residence time of the component in the mold. As such, when a component is ejected from the mold, the

shot may be full of PVA compound material that can be introduced into the mold to form the next component. When no additional components are to be molded (the "No" prong of step 512), the process is complete (step 518).

As set forth above, the described injection molding process 500 may be utilized with any number of molds to create components having practically any imaginable features. While nearly any size and shape of components can be created using the injection molding process 500, ball molds may be created for standard sized balls having diameters from 7/8" to 5" in 1/8" intervals.

It has been observed that the injection molding process 500 results in a random orientation of glass fibers in the molded components. It has also been determined that this random fiber orientation results in desirable strength characteristics. Thus, the injection molding process 500 may be particularly well-suited for generating rigid structural components.

Referring to FIG. 7, a flow chart illustrates the steps in a process 600 for producing tools, tool components, and balls from a PVA compound by extrusion. Initially, a raw or processed PVA compound (as well as any additional materials that are to be added during the extrusion process 600) are placed into the hopper of an extrusion machine (step 602). Similar to the injection molding process 500, the pellets are admitted from the hopper into a heating section (step 604). Also like the injection molding process 500, the heating section may include multiple heater bands each having independent temperature control. In one embodiment, the first heater band (the heater band closest to the hopper) may be controlled to 380° F. and the last heater band (the heater band closest to the die) may be controlled to 400° F., although other temperature settings and gradients may be appropriate depending on the properties of the specific PVA compound. The molten PVA compound is conveyed through the heating section by the rotation of a screw. Because extrusion is a continuous process (whereas injection molding is a batch process), the rate at which the molten PVA compound is conveyed through the heating section is also the rate at which the material is passed through a die, which creates the desired two dimensional profile of the extruded component (step 606). As the extruded PVA compound exits the die, it cools and solidifies (step 608). For components having a large cross-sectional area, the extrusion rate must be decreased to allow the extruded PVA compound to cool and solidify. For components having a smaller cross-sectional area, the extrusion rate may be increased. By way of example, a 5" diameter cylindrical bar may be extruded at a rate of 8" per hour while a 2" diameter cylindrical bar may be extruded at a rate of 12" per hour. When a desired length of extruded PVA compound has been passed through the die and allowed to solidify, the extruded PVA compound is cut (step 610).

To create the finished component, the extruded PVA compound is then machined to its final shape (step 612). In one embodiment, machining an extruded component may include machining a ball 434 from a cylindrical bar. In another embodiment, machining an extruded component may include removing stock and/or cutting threads into a pipe-shaped extrusion. For example, mandrel 410 may be formed as a pipe-shaped extrusion having a thick wall (e.g., having a wall thickness along its entire length that is equal to the wall thickness at the bottom of the mandrel 410) from which stock is removed to generate the ball seat 430 and to incorporate threads for conveying the plug 400 into a well. Similarly, the mandrel insert 432 described above may be formed from a pipe-shaped extrusion (i.e., a cylindrical

extrusion with an axial bore) that is machined to include external threads for insertion into the main body of the mandrel. The sealing element 418 may similarly be formed as a pipe-shaped extrusion.

The finished components generated by the injection molding process 500 or the extrusion process 600 may be annealed to increase the crystallinity of the PVA compound and to remove stresses and defects. The annealing process involves heating the finished component to between 300° F. and 400° F., holding the component at the elevated temperature for approximately 1-3 hours, and then allowing the component to be cooled to ambient temperature (approximately 70° F.). The finished components may be heated in an annealing oven or in a liquid heat transfer medium such as a heat transfer oil. Annealing has been observed to modify the degradation rates of finished components formed from PVA compounds.

As will be understood, extrusion process 600 may be preferred to injection molding process 500 for components that have a generally uniform cross-sectional profile due to its continuous nature (i.e., more components may be produced in a given amount of time via extrusion as opposed to injection molding). For example, mandrel 410, shoulders 412 and 424, cones 416 and 420, sealing element 418, and similarly-shaped components may all be good candidates for generation via the extrusion process 600. Likewise, ball 434 may be produced via the extrusion process 600. However, because the extrusion process 600 almost always requires the removal of some stock to generate the final components, there is some wasted material. Moreover, while the injection molding process 500 has been observed to generate a random orientation of reinforcing material (e.g., glass fibers) in the molded components, the extrusion process 600 results in reinforcing material orientations that are aligned with the extrusion direction or transverse to the extrusion direction depending upon the extrusion rate. Therefore, the beneficial effects of the random orientation of reinforcing material that are observed in injection molded components (i.e., strength in all loading directions) may not be observed in extruded components. However, because the extrusion process 600 can be controlled to cause reinforcing materials to be oriented in a desired orientation, the extrusion process may be ideally suited for producing components that are to be compressed in the extrusion direction or transverse to the extrusion direction. Additionally, production of components via the extrusion process 600 may be well-suited for use in the creation of non-reinforced components, such as, for example, a non-reinforced sealing element 418, which may be formed from a pipe-shaped extrusion.

As described herein, PVA compounds exhibit strength and degradability properties that render them well-suited for use in the formation of degradable downhole tools, tool components, and balls. The disclosed manufacturing processes can be utilized to form such tools, tool components, and balls in an almost unlimited number of shapes, sizes, and arrangements.

Raw PVA compounds may include 70-100 wt % PVA. More specifically, raw PVA compounds may include 70-75 wt %, 75-80 wt %, 80-85 wt %, 85-90 wt %, 90-95 wt %, or 95-100 wt % PVA. As described above, reinforcing materials may represent 5-60 wt % of a processed PVA compound, which may also include other fill materials and/or blend polymers. Processed PVA compounds used to create the tools, tool components, and balls described in the present application may include 20-95 wt % PVA. More specifically, processed PVA compounds may include 20-30

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wt %, 30-40 wt %, 40-50 wt %, 50-60 wt %, 60-70 wt %, 70-80 wt %, 80-90 wt %, or 90-95 wt % PVA.

The foregoing disclosure and the showings made of the drawings are merely illustrative of the principles of this invention and are not to be interpreted in a limiting sense. 5

What is claimed is:

1. A plug for use in a wellbore conduit, comprising: a body having an axial bore extending therethrough; one or more slips configured to move radially to engage an interior wall of the wellbore conduit; and a water-degradable, elastomeric sealing element configured to form a seal between an outer surface of the body and the interior wall of the wellbore conduit, wherein the sealing element is at least partially formed from a first polyvinyl alcohol compound comprising a blend of polyvinyl alcohol and styrene-rubber polymer.
2. The plug of claim 1, wherein the first polyvinyl alcohol compound further comprises an elastomeric polycaprolactam.
3. The plug of claim 1, wherein the first polyvinyl alcohol compound is produced using a chemical foaming agent.
4. The plug of claim 1, wherein the sealing element comprises back-up rings at its upper and lower ends.
5. The plug of claim 4, wherein the sealing element comprises a sealing portion that is positioned between the back-up rings and that is formed from the first polyvinyl alcohol compound.
6. The plug of claim 5, wherein the back-up rings are formed from a second polyvinyl alcohol compound.
7. The plug of claim 6, wherein the second polyvinyl alcohol compound comprises a fiberglass reinforcing material.
8. A plug for use in a wellbore conduit, comprising: a body having an axial bore extending therethrough; one or more slips configured to move radially to engage an interior wall of the wellbore conduit; and a water-degradable, elastomeric sealing element configured to form a seal between an outer surface of the body and the interior wall of the wellbore conduit, wherein the sealing element is at least partially formed from a first polyvinyl alcohol compound comprising a blend of polyvinyl alcohol and polycaprolactam.

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9. The plug of claim 8, wherein the polycaprolactam is an elastomeric polycaprolactam.

10. The plug of claim 8, wherein the first polyvinyl alcohol compound is produced using a chemical foaming agent.

11. The plug of claim 8, wherein the first polyvinyl alcohol compound further comprises a styrene-rubber polymer.

12. The plug of claim 8, wherein the sealing element comprises back-up rings at its upper and lower ends.

13. The plug of claim 12, wherein the sealing element comprises a sealing portion that is positioned between the back-up rings and that is formed from the first polyvinyl alcohol compound.

14. The plug of claim 13, wherein the back-up rings are formed from a second polyvinyl alcohol compound.

15. The plug of claim 14, wherein the second polyvinyl alcohol compound comprises a fiberglass reinforcing material.

16. A plug for use in a wellbore conduit, comprising: a body having an axial bore extending therethrough; one or more slips configured to move radially to engage an interior wall of the wellbore conduit; and a water-degradable, elastomeric sealing element configured to form a seal between an outer surface of the body and the interior wall of the wellbore conduit, wherein the sealing element is at least partially formed from a first polyvinyl alcohol compound that is produced using a chemical foaming agent.

17. The plug of claim 16, wherein the first polyvinyl alcohol compound further comprises an elastomeric polycaprolactam.

18. The plug of claim 16, wherein the first polyvinyl alcohol compound further comprises a styrene-rubber polymer.

19. The plug of claim 16, wherein the first polyvinyl alcohol compound further comprises a swelling compound.

20. The plug of claim 16, wherein the sealing element comprises back-up rings at its upper and lower ends, wherein the sealing element comprises a sealing portion that is positioned between the back-up rings and that is formed from the first polyvinyl alcohol compound.

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